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Geographies of Brain Culture: Optimism and Optimisation in Workplace Training Programmes

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Abstract

This paper outlines the strategic alignment of modes of emotional and psychological governance characteristic of 'brain culture' with intensified forms of workplace performance management within specifically neoliberal organisational cultures. We introduce the recent emergence of positive psychology-based workplace training programmes in the UK human resources field as a new empirical site for the study of cultural geographies of education. Such programmes promote a culture of optimism and optimal functioning, focussing on the cultivation of positive emotions amongst individual workers and in workplace cultures. This emphasis on wellbeing sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the global financial crisis, the UK's recent recession and the diminishing role of the UK state in the provision of welfare, but is wholly concurrent with the neoliberal promotion of 'lifelong learning' and the spread of individualised practices of performance management in UK workplaces. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with trainers and practitioners who variously use positive psychology, mindfulness training and strengths-based competencies in workplaces in the UK, and outlines their connection to the development of positive psychology as a new academic discipline in the USA. In outlining the importance of context for understanding changing workplace cultures and worker subjectivities, a cultural geography analysis of rapid advancements in psychological knowledge provides a useful new perspective on the links between neoliberalism, behavioural change and brain culture.

Keywords: positive psychology; behaviour change; neuroscience; organisations; emotional labour

Introduction

Optimism and optimisation have become the watch words of the relatively new scientific discipline of positive psychology. These emotional tropes are increasingly evident in the everyday experiences of workplace cultures, including 'workplace wellbeing' provision, worker training programmes and performance management techniques. In this paper, we consider how these notions are part of a wider 'brain culture' in which knowledges, images and representations of the brain, mind and behaviour are prioritised in the justification of human action and decision-making¹. By outlining both the formalised scientific endeavours and the everyday emotional labour involved in achieving optimism and optimisation in the workplace, we demonstrate the governmental and economic logics implicated in the designation and cultivation of positive affects within workplace cultures. We argue that an emphasis on cultural-economic *context* is essential for understanding how specific

manifestations of psychological knowledge are adopted as explanations of the self and of behaviour in specific spaces and times.

The geographies of education has developed into an empirically wide-ranging field which embraces 'outward-looking' approaches extending beyond a concern for children and young people and towards analysis of knowledge economies². It engages with diverse spaces of informal and alternative learning³, and examines the invocation of pedagogical forms of governance across multiple social and political sectors including media spaces, policing, immigration, welfare practice, and community activism⁴. However, there is not to our knowledge any existing geographical analysis of the workplace as a space of education and of workers as learners. Whilst disciplines such as educational studies, human resource management, organisational studies and the economics of human capital have long established research on adult skills, training, worker education, and policies, practices and discourses of 'lifelong learning'⁵, geographical research on these phenomena is fairly sparse, and is often focused on training, vocational and skills programmes for the unemployed⁶. We therefore propose an investigation of the specific educational endeavours of workplace training programmes and the pedagogical rationalities of workplace wellbeing and organisational management as an important new focus for the geographical study of education.

A synthesis of emotional geographies and cultural-economic labour geographies allows us to offer new insight into workplace cultures as hitherto overlooked spaces of education. Such spaces are arguably as important as schools as significant sites for the production of citizen-subjectivity and of economically- and emotionally-imbued social relations. Clearly an analysis of the cultivation of emotions such as optimism and 'work on the self' in the name of optimisation implies that emotional and psychological governance matters in the spaces of work. Moving beyond this simple assertion, however, it is our concern here to understand emotion "in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states"⁷. By building on emotional geographers' contention that emotions are located both in the body and in place, that emotions exist as products of social relationships, and that there are high political stakes associated with the representation of emotions, we investigate workplace training programmes as specific sites of emotional and psychological governance in the context of Anglo-American neoliberalism. Interrogating the explicit management of workers' emotions and the emotional health of an organisational culture, we argue that such programmes are crucial to understanding the cultural geographies of the workplace within 'soft' capitalist societies. Managers are not only now charged with the surveillance of workers' time, and with fostering specific spatial arrangements conducive to a more productive/creative workplace, but they must also work to shape the psychological resilience and emotional wellbeing of their workers whilst continually improving their own emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Positive psychology has thus emerged as a means by which to re-educate the worker as what might be termed a 'neurocitizen'; a readily employable worker who is skilled in the management of their and others' emotions, is committed to the pursuit of self-optimisation, and is responsible for their own psychological governance⁸. In this sense, positive psychology workplace training programmes mobilise pedagogical mechanisms – fostering learning about one's own mind – in the broad pursuit of behavioural change. The worker's intimate and personal attributes, strengths and commitments are to be aligned with that of the company and by extension, the economy.

The cultural-economic context of 'soft' neoliberal capitalism does not simply provide a backdrop in which workplace training programmes based on positive psychology have thrived. Rather, new forms of emotional and psychological governance in the workplace have relied on the emergence of a brain culture which provides the scientific grounds and practical mechanisms for the promotion of individualised lifelong learning and performance management. The shaping of worker subjectivities as flexibilized human capital resources, and as competitors within a precarious and constantly changing employment context are well-documented facets of a neoliberal focus on employability (as distinct from a Keynesian commitment to employment). The ratcheting up of happiness economics and workplace wellbeing programmes is concurrent with a shift from welfare to workfare and a significant decline in formal union representation amongst workers since the 1980s⁹. In this context, the job-seeking citizen and the worker have, for many, been responsiblized and abandoned by the state and their labour power eroded¹⁰. Employers too are increasingly demanding workers with 'go-getting' attitudes, aptitudes, competencies and skills. This emphasis on personality, on positive emotion and positive affects mark a new and troubling shift away from the collectivism of state welfare and towards the personalisation of wellbeing.

However, the emotional mechanisms and potential consequences of producing such subjectivities are not well understood. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's account of the incorporation of feelings into everyday working practices and the commercialisation of intimate private life is one important reference point for geographers investigating the workplace as a distinctive space in which 'the cultural' and 'the economic' intersect within the context of late capitalist service economies¹¹. Her work narrates how workers are charged with creating particular workplace atmospheres, deploying their emotional labour in the service of the company's profitability. The consequence of this emotional self-management is that workers become alienated from their own sense of self. Cultural-economic geographers such as Linda McDowell¹² have, like Hochschild, examined the emotional and embodied labour required by working life within a contemporary service and knowledge economy. This has the particular effect of producing highly gendered workplace cultures in which emotional intelligence finds new status, whilst at the very same time being devalued as a naturalised feminine trait. Bodily intimacy, appearance, age, weight, height and manners have become key assets for the employable worker in this context¹³. This work re-orientates us geographically to focus on the micro-scale of workplace settings and organisational cultures as crucial for understanding the everyday realisation and consequences of global economic change.

Workplace training programmes such as those based on positive psychology offer an important perspective on how organisational management approaches aim to cultivate positive emotions amongst workers and within workplace cultures. They provide us with a hitherto underexplored site in which educational imperatives based on brain culture are put in the service of a neoliberal emphasis on performance management. In so doing, such training sets out to produce worker subjectivities which must internalise an emotional commitment to optimism and optimisation. The paper is split into two main sections. In the first we review the emergence of positive psychology as a new field of practice and outline some of the key tenets of workplace based training and education

programmes available across the UK. Here we trace the US routes of positive psychology as a way of investigating how such knowledges and practices ‘travel’, highlighting the centrality of geographical *context* to our analysis. In the second section we interrogate the convergence of wellbeing and optimal performance in workplace training within the contemporary UK economic context, before drawing some conclusions about practices of emotional and psychological governance in workplace settings. The paper is based on in-depth interviews with 20 (7 female and 13 male) practitioners of positive psychology, strengths-based approaches and mindfulness who are involved in delivering workplace based training programmes in the UK, with some practitioners delivering such programmes world-wide¹⁴. The interviews were complemented by a web-based survey of contemporary providers of workplace training programmes and documentary analysis of 27 positive psychology texts. The data was analysed using in vivo coding including the following meta-themes: body and emotion; character strengths; control/autonomy; disciplinary developments; economic context; wellbeing, happiness and welfare; workplace culture. The research was undertaken between May-August 2013.

Learning optimism from the USA

Positive psychology has become an influential approach to organisational management in several global companies. Training courses and consultancies offering education for frontline workers, workplace managers and human resource specialists have become increasingly commonplace since the late 1990s. By the start of the twenty-first century techniques used to improve the happiness and wellbeing of employees had penetrated the heart of American business (Ehrenreich, 2009) and were fast spreading to the UK and Europe. Positive psychology at work is used for two main reasons. Firstly, to improve the mental attitude of employees making them more positive and ultimately more productive. Depression-related absenteeism from work has been estimated by Gallup to be costing the US economy over \$23 billion a year¹⁵, and in a survey conducted by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI)/Pfizer, it was said to cost the UK economy over £14 billion per year, with mental health conditions being the main cause of absence from work¹⁶. Meanwhile, the concept of ‘presenteeism’ has come to the fore since the global financial crisis of 2008, referring to workers coming to work despite their ill-health, often through fear of redundancy¹⁷. Secondly, positive psychology is used in different ways by supervisors and leaders to change organisational cultures to try to reduce reproachful styles of management and instead encourage better performance through creativity, productivity and strong engagement with other employees, customers and the company.

Positive psychology at work has become an umbrella term which describes several inter-related (and sometimes contested) approaches to changing workplace cultures through cultivating the emotional wellbeing, states and dispositions of workers and workplaces (table 1). In this paper we consider the ways in which the workplace training sector is re-educating workers using techniques, courses and pedagogies nested under the umbrella term of positive psychology and why certain approaches hold sway with business managers particularly in the endeavour of cultivating new worker subjectivities.

Table 1: Approaches to positive psychology at work

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Psychometric testing | surveys which aim to identify and measure a person's attributes or psychological traits, sometimes used in recruitment |
| Strength-based assessments | a type of psychometric test which aims to identify a person's core strengths |
| Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) | an approach derived from psychology, counselling and hypnotherapy which aims to manipulate situations, relationships and interactions through body language and framing to achieve specific goals |
| Appreciative Inquiry (AI) | a 'positive change methodology' which aims to identify an organisations' success, release positive potential, imagine positive futures ¹⁸ |
| 'Flow' | immersing oneself optimally in an experience ¹⁹ |
| Mindfulness practice | a form of meditation derived from Buddhism which aims to help people focus their conscious attention on the present, brought into western practice largely by John Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School ²⁰ |

For critics such as US author, Barbara Ehrenreich, it is no coincidence that positive psychology has developed in the specific geographical context of the US during the 1980s, on the back of a wave of 'positive thinking' and motivational speaking predominant in the US corporate sphere²¹. She argues that the 1980s push towards downsizing challenged rational management techniques as businesses began to restructure and reorganise. Traditional management techniques were being undermined by the demands of shareholders, rapid economic and technological change, and advancements in communication. Managers needed innovative ways to get the most out of their workforce. Practitioners of positive psychology have also argued that the global financial crisis has meant that business managers have to do more with less. For some, this is an opportunity to make workplaces more ethical and more sustainable²², and for others, it is a business opportunity for workplace training providers:

"I know a lot of organisations got to the point where they had cut as much as they could cut without permanently damaging the organisation, they couldn't ask any more of their people and yet they needed to, so they started to look at what they could put back into their people to rebuild them. That in tandem with the faddish interest in positive psychology and happiness at work and wellbeing and mindfulness has caused people to think that 'oh there might be something in this, if we look after our employees better maybe they will perform better'. That combination of things has driven positive psychology in business."

Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.

These geographical and contextual factors have been important in providing the business conditions in which positive psychology workplace training programmes have thrived. In some cases workplace training in positive psychology was seen (by managers and some trainers) as an easy route to improved workplace performance i.e. "if you are in a positive state of mind at work you will do a better job" (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work, interviewed 20/05/13*). Alongside this has been a set of academic developments which are regarded as key

reference points for the recent establishment of positive psychology as a distinct discipline. Positive psychologists often mark this point with the pioneering work of US psychologist Martin Seligman, whose books, *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, and more recently, *Flourish*, have been both popular and important sources for a rapidly expanding discipline²³. In about 1999, it is said that Seligman started up the first network of positive psychologists, and his “charisma and organizational skills” are said to be important factors in the success of this network²⁴. Seligman became the president of the American Psychological Society in 1998, marking the acceptance of positive psychology within the mainstream discipline. Meetings were held in Philadelphia, Washington DC, Lincoln, Lawrence, Columbia, Grand Cayman and Akumal²⁵. At its root was Seligman’s²⁶ assertion that psychology had for too long told a “half-baked” story about the human mind; its focus on trauma, disorder and pathology and its ‘fix it’ mentality had been at the expense of developing any substantive knowledge about positive traits, emotions, states of mind and aspects of character which could be said to be strengths or virtues. These positive elements could help people to achieve not only mental health, but to thrive and flourish; to live the good life, to live well and to achieve *authentic* happiness. This rounded approach has been particularly attractive in human resource management and workplace training initiatives which have concentrated their efforts primarily on how to create positive or virtuous workplace cultures, and on how to improve workers’ personal strengths²⁷.

For some proponents of positive psychology, Seligman and other prominent US-based figures such as Don Clifton (who developed the Clifton strengths psychometric test), and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (who advanced the concept of ‘flow’) and Rick Snyder (who worked on *hope*) revived a longer tradition of humanistic psychology which can be dated back to the work of Abraham Maslow. As early as 1954 Maslow commented that psychology had for too long been concerned only with the ‘dark side’ of humanity²⁸. That said, there have been a series of high-profile debates between humanistic and positive psychologists since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi²⁹ dismissed humanistic psychology as a non-scientific venture associated with the narcissistic industry of ‘self-help’³⁰. Given the positioning (one assumes by the publishers) of many of Seligman’s books as ‘how to’ self-help books, with subtitles such as “How to change your mind and your life” (*Learned Optimism*), “Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment” (*Authentic Happiness*), and “A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them” (*Flourish*), this criticism stands out as particularly unfortunate. The core concepts and topics for positive psychology are wide-ranging: including but not limited to: happiness; flow; hope; optimism; emotional intelligence; engagement; giftedness; creativity; wisdom; meaning; positive affects; positive emotion; positive traits; positive self; positive relationships; positive change; motivation; character strengths; subjective-wellbeing; courage; virtues; accomplishment; savouring; resilience; gratitude; mindfulness; mindsets; and love. There is also a role for nutrition and physical exercise suggesting that a healthy body is integrated with character virtues and positive mental states. But the establishment of positive psychology as a named discipline is recent; it is a young discipline which is self-consciously searching for acceptance as a serious field of academic enquiry.

Since those initial meetings from Philadelphia to Akumal, masters programmes in positive psychology have been one of predominant ways in which the discipline has been established, with 'MAPP' courses (Masters in Applied Positive Psychology) available at several institutions³¹. New academic journals and several textbooks have been published³². Several of our interviewees have graduated from one of the MAPP courses in recent years. One of our interviewees recalls the rapid emergence of positive psychology recounting how it arrived in the UK in around 2001 after sessions on positive psychology were organised by students at the British Psychological Society (BPS) annual conference at which Martin Seligman spoke:

"Martin Seligman was very lucky to launch it from a big enough platform at that point to attract a lot of interest, so I would say in the beginning it was a movement. And then it transformed [...] into much more of a discipline due to the large amount of scholarly work in the area and publications that brought everything together."

Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13.

But it was not universally welcomed within mainstream psychology, and scholars in this field had to deal with a degree of hostility: "I remember sometime in 2001/2002 mentioning it in the BPS, the very senior levels [that I] do positive psychology and literally having a reaction that people laugh at my face" (*Senior Lecturer in Positive Psychology, interviewed 21/08/13*). In the face of such criticism, it is not uncommon for a textbook in positive psychology to begin with an assertion of its scientific credentials, or an assertion of what it is not (positive thinking, pseudo-science, 'mumbo-jumbo', self-help). There is still very much a sense that the 'case for' positive psychology is still being made³³. In the Foreword to the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, a vast and pioneering compendium of work in positive psychology, the series editor, Peter Nathan writes that:

"[p]ositive psychology is psychology – psychology is science – and science requires checking theories against evidence. Accordingly, positive psychology is not to be confused with untested self-help, footless affirmation, or secular religion no matter how good these make us feel. Positive psychology is neither a recycled version of the power of positive thinking nor a sequel to *The Secret*³⁴".

It is not our intention in this paper to cast aspersions on the scientific merits of positive psychology, but rather – in the spirit of other histories and sociologies of science – it is to show how its 'scientificness' has been of major appeal in the application of positive psychology in workplace training programmes adopted in business. As one practitioner pointed out:

"Businesses are very faddish, they always like the latest thing, especially if it has come from academia and it sounds quite scientific, especially if it is to do with the brain and especially if they think it is something that will help the business perform better."

Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.

Some techniques that fall under the umbrella of positive psychology, and are offered in the repertoire of many positive psychology trainers, are increasingly popular with businesses not only because of their 'scientificness' but also their media attention. Mindfulness is a good example of this and its emerging scientific validity has received considerable positive attention from UK media, as the Director of this training consultancy demonstrates:

It [mindfulness] is emerging as more popular [than the other aspects of positive psychology I teach] and I think a lot of that is because it has been in the press and there is so much science behind it. A lot of the stuff I do is very basic brain science, so about working with your brain instead of against it.

Strategic Learning Specialist, Director of mindfulness and positive psychology training consultancy, interviewed 9/7/13.

In light of the appeal that the scientific prowess of positive psychology appears to have amongst business it is of interest that so many positive psychology publications draw attention to its scientific methods, paraphernalia, communities and rigour. Sarah Lewis, managing director of organizational consultancy, *Appreciating Change* puts it as follows:

"[p]ositive psychology is further distinguished from positive thinking by the fact that it has 'body of knowledge' structures such as collegiate bodies, university departments, professors and rigorous accredited academic courses...it has all the paraphernalia of scientific discourse with peer-reviewed journals and academic conferences. Its practitioners apply to respected scientific bodies for research grants. Assertions made as fact can be checked, verified or refuted by others³⁵."

The application of positive psychology to workplace environments and the incentive for a growing industry of trainers to sell the benefits of these techniques increases the capacity for conducting research into the impact of positive psychology on workplace performance indicators such as stress levels, absenteeism, presenteeism, workplace engagement and productivity.

Other practitioners are more critical of the field of positive psychology and warn that its commercial, workplace based applications can sometimes over-ride its scientific rigour,

"I mean, you do get a lot of people in positive psychology who are, dare I say it, just talk a load of old mumbo jumbo you know, are still going down the route of positive affirmations and stuff like that, you know, the old positive thinking nonsense or talking about abundance and, you know, the book 'The Secret'?"

Provider of strengths-based workplace training and member of International Positive Psychology Association, interviewed 18/07/13.

It is therefore exceedingly important to some practitioners of positive psychology in workplace training, not least to be able to sell their approach to businesses, that their pedagogical approach is based on providing scientifically validated methods for creating positive workers and positive workplace cultures. In this sense, they are not to be mistaken for practitioners of earlier 'fads' to hit

the business world, such as Neurolinguistic Programming, which as one of our interviewees highlighted, in his view ‘stole’ selective observations from counselling, hypnotherapy and psychology in order to essentially manipulate people into behaving in particular ways in the workplace. Neither are they simply evangelists of ‘positive thinking’ – just being hopeful will not magic good outcomes into existence. They do not avoid discussions of negativity³⁶. Nor do they dismiss pessimism – which has an important role in helping to provide an accurate perception of reality, and is crucial in many job roles such as treasurer, financial and business administrator, safety engineer and risk assessors³⁷. Positive psychologists have been working hard to avoid associations with positive thinking. Their claim is to deal in the ‘science of optimism’; not just to look on the bright side of life.

Indeed, optimism has been an important concept in positive psychology. Building on his earlier (highly controversial) research with Richard Solomon on learned helplessness in the 1960s, Seligman and Steve Maier went on to argue that as well as reward and punishment, *expectation* had an impact on animal behaviour (in this case in dogs) and could create the conditions for ‘*learned optimism*’. Seligman went on to test his theory of learned optimism in the workplace Seligman went on to test his theory in the workplace – with life insurance salespeople, who he found to be more successful in sales when they had been recruited for their optimism; they learned to deal with rejection better³⁸. Ehrenreich also found that large drug companies saw the potential of optimism in business, beginning active recruitment drives targeting college cheerleaders who were seen to be inherently enthusiastic and positive able to achieve high sales targets³⁹. Optimism for positive psychologists is a “state of explanation” rather than a state of mind. It refers to how we explain the causes of events to ourselves and is said to have positive benefits not only in terms of workplace performance, but with respect to our mental and physical health, our resilience and life satisfaction⁴⁰. For psychologists of positive emotions such as Michael Cohn and Barbara Fredrickson, it is this quality of *explanation* which makes something like optimism worth researching as an emotion with real effects. It is something more than a mood or a sensation; it involves “an appraisal of the situation”. Their “broaden-and-build-theory” has been used in workplace settings because it confers that experiencing positive emotions can both *broaden* a person’s sense of actions/choices available to them, and can *build* personal resources (social bonds, attachments, intellectual and cognitive skills, creativity and improved brain development)⁴¹. But not only can positive emotion improve performance in the workplace, it can make you less racist, more open to ‘the other’, less stressed, and more psychologically resilient to negative situations. As such, they have set out to provide scientific evidence of the real physical and psychological benefits of positive emotions through experimental studies. Through an 8 week ‘loving-kindness meditation’ intervention based on mindfulness practice, participants in the research were said to show “increases in a number of personal resources, including physical wellness, agency for achieving important goals, ability to savor positive experiences, and quality of close relationships”⁴². Their research aims to demonstrate the role of positive emotions in “humanity’s toolbox for growth”, and to understand the appropriate balance, or “critical ratios of positivity to negativity”⁴³.

In many ways, as several of our interviewees admitted, the development of positive psychology as a science and as a set of practices has pulled the discipline itself in different directions. The time lags

of academic publishing, it was pointed out, simply do not suit the business decision-making context. While the 'scientificness' of positive psychology is clearly attractive to organisational managers, there is no time to wait for research trials, the development of testable hypotheses and repeated and validated experimental results. So trainers working in organisational contexts have amended and adapted positive psychology research in order to develop their own workable training programmes to meet business needs:

"we are unusual in the fact that we ourselves have been critics of positive psychology because we have developed our own strength assessment and development tool [...which] includes weaknesses as one of the elements of feedback. When we launched that we got loads of criticism from colleagues in positive psychology asking how we could include weaknesses in a strengths tool. The answer is simple – our clients and organisations, and real people in the real world were telling us that strengths are great but I also need to know what is going to trip me up and it needs to be balanced and realistic."

Provider of strengths-based workplace training, interviewed 16/07/13.

Nevertheless, the science of optimism is a linchpin for the positive psychology workplace training provider which is regularly used in the specific development of leadership skills in workplace settings, as one practitioner remarked:

"...you can sort of talk to [workers] about the power of positive emotion and if you've got a problem to solve, the best thing you can possibly do is get your team laughing and then tell them about, you know, and then solve the problem. If you try and do it from a position of doom and gloom and this is all terrible, the brain can't do it, you know, it's kind of, pretty obvious stuff really. And again that's Barbara Fredrickson's work so you're linking it back to science."

Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed, 17/07/13.

The development of leadership strengths here is linked with the biophysical capacities of the brain. The brain *requires* positive emotion in order to fulfil a successful leadership role. Whilst as we have already noted, it has been US based psychologists who have developed the testable precepts of positive emotion, optimism and strengths-based approaches, their findings and implications have been adopted in global businesses across many sectors, as well as in the public sector. Our interviewees had provided consultations for businesses such as BMW in the UK, Germany and China, L'Oreal in France, large pharmaceutical, design, utilities companies, private and public schools, the NHS, UK local authorities, universities and regional police departments, though many did not want to reveal the names of the companies they had worked for. However, one of the biggest markets for positive psychology training was from other trainers who wanted to start their own business and become qualified in teaching positive psychology. Indeed, training trainers appeared to be an industry in itself.

So how did positive psychology 'go global' at such a rapid pace? Partly, this is due to the highly regarded leadership style and lecture tours of Martin Seligman, but it is perhaps their adoption by global management consulting companies which has secured their widespread reach. Global

consultants, McKinsey and Company, as one of our interviewees noted, have embraced a range of positive psychology approaches including: “strengths, authenticity, resilience, it’s all in there, energy, mindfulness, the whole lot” (*former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed, 17/07/13*). Their specific term for their approach is ‘centred leadership’ and boasts “organizational development, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, positive psychology, and leadership; workshops with hundreds of clients to test our ideas; and global surveys” as its academic knowledge base⁴⁴. Like many other strengths approaches to organisational management, they narrowed down the capacities of the excellent leader to just a handful of sometimes general, sometimes specific attributes: “finding meaning in work, converting emotions such as fear or stress into opportunity, leveraging connections and community, acting in the face of risk, and sustaining the energy that is the life force of change”⁴⁵. Another global consulting company, Gallup, provide a psychometric test which was developed by renowned psychologist, Don Clifton, who was given a Presidential Commendation as the “Father of Strengths-Based Psychology” by the American Psychological Association in 2002⁴⁶. The Gallup/Clifton Strengths Finder is a 35 minute timed online questionnaire which will rank your 34 strengths for only \$9.99⁴⁷. This report is then used by workplace coaches and training providers to cater their training to your top strengths. Gallup also sell training kits for coaches, and their own coaches currently provide training in coaching in the global business hubs of London, Washington, Singapore and Sydney.

But these strength based psychometric tests have not been an unreserved global success. They recently made headlines when the UK government’s Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) began piloting strengths personality survey in order to assess job-seekers allowance benefit claimants’ character strengths. The survey was originally designed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman at the VIA (Values in Action) Institute on Character, Cincinnati, USA. Claimants who refused to take the test were threatened with benefits sanctions/withdrawal⁴⁸, and the Department for Work and Pensions and BIT were criticised by both the press and VIA Institute itself for using a shortened, un-validated version of the survey⁴⁹. As Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park report, the VIA strengths classification which sought to identify “the qualities of a person worthy of moral praise” was constructed by listing the character strengths/virtues of historical and contemporary figures ranging from Benjamin Franklin, to John Templeton (a stock investor and philanthropist whose Templeton Foundation has funded research projects, large research centres and distinguished prizes in Positive Psychology), and even fictional personalities such as the Klingons from US TV series *Star Trek*. They also did content analysis of greetings cards, car bumper stickers, personal ads, songs, graffiti, tarot cards, Pokémon and Harry Potter characters. Finally, they made a list of virtues mentioned in the world’s major religious and philosophical texts, and eventually narrowed these down to 24 universal positive traits⁵⁰.

Lest we be sceptical about whether it is possible in this manner to identify universal character traits within a world of cultural, political, social, ideological and religious diversity, Peterson and Park have undertaken internet based research, using the survey with 111,676 respondents in 54 different nations and all 50 US states, finding that:

“in almost all nations, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, the most commonly endorsed strengths were kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude, and open-mindedness, and the lesser strengths included prudence, modesty, and self-regulation....we speculate that our results revealed something about universal human nature and/or the character requirements minimally needed for a viable society⁵¹”

This is certainly not a modest endeavour, therefore, and they make no secret of their ambitions to understand the very purpose of life, as Peterson and Park explain: “Our project supports the premise of positive psychology that attention to good character sheds light on what makes life worth living. As Aristotle (2000) proposed long ago, happiness is the purpose of life, and living in accordance with one’s virtues is how to achieve happiness”⁵². Together, the bold claims of the science of optimism, the physiology of positive emotions and the universality of character strengths provide workplace training providers with a varied toolkit for working on and working up people’s optimism in the workplace, and crucially, for helping people to function optimally. It is to this virtue of optimisation that we now turn.

From providing welfare to optimising wellbeing

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the relative decline in welfare provision in countries such as the UK and USA has been mirrored by the rise of optimism and optimal functioning as key competencies in the workplace. One positive psychology consultant describes how these pivotal terms have become central to the operation of business:

“So I talk about, you know, feeling good and functioning well and that’s quite a helpful discussion to have with businesses because it’s about, you know, this isn’t just about helping people feel better and feel happy all the time, it’s also about how they function in the world”

Former business HR manager and current positive psychology consultant, interviewed 17/07/13.

“Feeling good and functioning well” is the kind of bite-size promise that works well in the workplace training industry, where consultants must by the very nature of their business provide their clients with tangible results. At the very least they should give the hope of positive organisational change, and at most, the achievement of personal transformation. This transformation involves capitalising on one’s strengths, cultivating positive emotional traits and functioning optimally. It is a form of behaviour change which like Seligman’s pioneering experiments, ironically takes issue with a behaviourist approach to psychology, challenging their ‘transactional’ model of action in which behavioural change is conditioned by reward and punishment. As one of our interviewees described, shifting from a transactional to transformational theory of behavioural motivation has important commercial benefits which are presumably of particular appeal in times of economic stagnation or

recession. Here the interviewee refers to popular business author, Daniel Pink's work on intrinsic forms of motivation:

"Now transformational relationships or what Dan Pink would call Motivation 2.0, offers a really interesting promise, which is people will work the hardest not for money, not for reward, not for pay, not for punishment but for pleasure, for satisfaction. Now you've got to imagine how enormously appealing that is to a company."

Director of a Business Development company, interviewed 21/7/13.

Indeed, many trainers relied on bite-sized promises or slogans which they taught leaders on these courses to help them tune in to the emotional motivations of their workforce in order to get the most out of them, for example; "you can squeeze adequacy out of anybody but you can only motivate people to success" (*practitioner in positive psychology and advisor on happiness at work, interviewed 20/05/13*). In addition to the aforementioned positive psychology training, centred leadership, mindfulness and strengths surveys, the practice of *appreciation* has developed in parallel as an important means of getting the best out of people in the workplace context. Again, it may seem fairly obvious that being nice to workers and praising people's efforts might pay dividends in terms of their continued commitment and their general satisfaction at work, but workplace training providers have established a new approach to business management called 'Appreciative Inquiry', based on the ideas of David Cooperrider, a business consultant, speaker and management scholar at Case Western Reserve University, USA. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organisational change which regards organisations not as problems to be solved but as "high commitment work systems" in which a focus on optimising workers' commitments, passions, success stories and strengths can engender more organic organisational change. For Cooperrider, the traditional management approach of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) focusses too much on the negative. Instead, Cooperrider has developed SOAR, "the systematic study of signature strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results"⁵³. Optimisation here means doing away with weakness and threats and being more optimistic about people's capacity to create, innovate, enliven and aspire for a better workplace culture. Optimism is also tied in with optimisation because, as one practitioner of AI told us, there is a sense in which organisational change is perpetual, and therefore organisations must always strive to be better:

"it's continuous change, it's always there, and if you had that definition then I think it really strengthens the need for any of the positive stuff, because the only way to keep moving is constant change is to continuously build on what you do well."

Director of strength-based organisational development company providing Solutions Focus and Appreciative Inquiry, interviewed 21/7/13.

Optimisation is not only a major goal at the level of the organisation but also an important learning outcome at a more personal level; workers must strive to be the best they can be. But it is not simply that they should be the best worker in a competitive organisation, but they should be the best *person* that they can be. In recognising and evaluating their strengths, and thus their

'weaknesses' found lower down on the strengths scale, they should work on themselves in order to fulfil their maximum potential. Many of the trainers and positive psychology providers we interviewed talked about the importance of addressing the 'whole person' in the course of their training, not just the worker. It was also clear that some of the trainers had internalised these principles in explaining their own character, strengths and working lives. One managing director of a strengths-based workplace training provider recalled how she had tried to overcome her perceived weakness in communication for some important training work in Miami, despite the fact that she didn't enjoy this aspect of her work at that time:

"Right, now, because it's a skill I learned and this takes me back to my Carnegie days, right, where I could do all of these things, but I didn't actually enjoy it, right? So I got myself coached, I got myself a personal coach and everything so I could do the best job possible when I went to Miami. Now the reason I took that approach, even subconsciously, is my No.1 strength is maximizer, so of course I would want to do the best, I would never settle for anything that wasn't top, so even though I didn't want to do it, I was going to give it my best shot, does that make sense?"

Managing director of a strengths-based workplace training provider, interviewed 02/8/13.

As she rationalises the situation, it was her strength as a maximizer that enabled her to work on herself to improve her communication skills to enable her to 'do the best job possible'. This narrative of optimisation has become a familiar refrain for many social theorists who are seeking to explain the implications of psychological and psychiatric sciences for governance and citizenship. Particular attention has been paid to understanding the development of a 'science of happiness', for instance – and to outlining the integration of a self-optimising therapeutic culture with neoliberal forms of governance⁵⁴. In this regard, positive psychology in workplaces can be seen as just one aspect of a broader pedagogic turn within advanced liberal societies in which the perpetual re-education of the entrepreneurial self is deemed essential⁵⁵. But it is not enough to develop a sense of adaptability and flexibility in terms of the skills and capacities required for a working life based on re-skilling as opposed to a life-long career. Rather, it is now crucial to develop the psychological resilience to cope emotionally, and the character strengths to consistently out-perform yourself in an uncertain work environment.

The focus on happiness, psychological resilience, character development and training in positive emotions is now evident in several spheres beyond the workplace (for instance in military training, schools, adult mental health settings and economic policy). Whilst people may be biologically limited in terms of their 'set range' of happiness, according to Seligman, *authentic happiness* is under your voluntary control; it is educable, and it is therefore your responsibility to optimise⁵⁶. Positive psychology workplace training providers can be seen as just one set of actors mobilised in what has become an internationalised programme of behavioural change involving no less than the re-invention of the human subject. This neurocitizen is morally deficient but at the same time capable –

with the right education and the cultivation of a better 'explanatory style' (i.e. an optimistic one) of learned greatness. If these sound like grand claims, it is because the claims of positive psychology are couched very much in these transformational terms. But if the effects of a shift towards happiness in workplace cultures and other contexts are to be taken seriously, then a set of political concerns arise which must be given due consideration. The dark side of happiness has been subject to critique by psychologists and social/cultural theorists alike⁵⁷. Psychologist, Barabara Held has argued that positive psychology is characterised by a "tyranny of the positive attitude" which has its roots not in scientific experiment but in American popular culture⁵⁸. She suggests that this can have obvious negative side-effects; that of blaming individuals for their own unhappiness. Moreover, she calls into question some of the main scientific tenets of positive psychology, which she finds to be wanting in terms of their grip on reality. She argues that Seligman's methods for countering pessimism rely on the cultivation of what he himself terms "positive illusions" for avoiding depression, improving health and increasing achievements⁵⁹.

Whilst Held's focus is on the internal validity of some of the core arguments of positive psychology, particularly the place of optimism bias, others have sought to problematize happiness and positive psychology as a movement which shapes new citizen-subjectivities and reframes the logic of government. Sam Binkley has argued that happiness itself has become an object of governance – it has been rendered governable through a new set of techniques aimed at "the optimization, coordination and integration of human behaviors"⁶⁰. For Binkley this poses a problem for governmentality theorists who have not yet adequately considered the non-rational realm of emotional governance. The integration of happiness with economic policy (in Layard's promotion of the index of Gross National Happiness Index⁶¹) is one sense in which the optimisation of optimism is rendered a national policy goal. In the same terms, positive psychology in workplace training can be seen as an everyday manifestation of this overall ambition – that is, in the optimisation of the psychologically resilient, adaptive and optimistic worker in uncertain economic times. Binkley's observation of positive psychology's disassociation of the psyche from social relations has particular resonance for geographers seeking to better understand the situated nature of (workplace) subjectivity⁶². It provides a corrective to positive psychology's dismissal of the role of context in determining authentic happiness; its account of globally universal character strengths is one testament to this. Positive psychology prioritizes the individual over cultural-economic context. So whilst a limited set of certain 'life circumstances' such as being married, religious or living in a democratic country may have a positive impact on your happiness, it is through developing a *sense of personal control* over the conditions in which one lives that will help people to avoid learned helplessness and to instead re-educate their optimism and improve their health, wellbeing, life satisfaction and longevity; to escape their contexts⁶³. It is not through changing those circumstances, nor through social change nor political conflict that one can achieve happiness, but through changing the individual self. Curiously though, it is precisely *because of* the growth of market individualism and the simultaneous decline of family, nation and God, that positive psychology is said to be needed⁶⁴. Seligman contends that a belief system which values the 'maximal self' has come at the expense of a common purpose⁶⁵. This is curious in the sense that it is through the highly individualistic project of self-optimisation that positive psychology is said to reap benefit, not least in the aforementioned approaches based on maximizing character strengths to foster more effective workplace identities.

It is by 'feeling good and functioning well', particularly in the workplace, that one can fulfil one's own potential within a free market in which continued employment is increasingly precarious. In this scenario, externally imposed controls such as a too restrictive and weakness-focussed workplace culture, an entrepreneur-stifling business environment or a dependency-creating welfare state are an impediment to the personal well-being that comes from developing a personal mastery over your cognitive habits and your emotional states. Happiness therefore lies in your sense of agency and freedom to escape your social situation through learned exercises and training programmes which only work if you put in the emotional labour to be adequately optimistic.

3. Conclusion: emotional work cultures

In this paper, we have argued that workplace training programmes have become an important pedagogic site for re-education of 'neurocitizens'; in this case, workers who have developed psychological self-mastery such that they can manage their own emotional states in ways which are both optimistic and optimising. Workers' conceptions of personal transformation and growth become closely aligned with the goals of their organisation, company and the wider economy. These conceptions are intentionally shaped by the science and practice of positive psychology courses, training and coaching. We began by outlining the perceived need for such emotional labour within a recession-state service and knowledge economy in which the narratives of absentee and presenteeism have come to the fore. This global economic situation has provided the circumstances in which positive psychology can, excuse the pun, flourish. For whilst as we have shown, positive psychology has been self-consciously mapping out its disciplinary identity as assuredly scientific, it is this very scientificness which has provided positive psychology workplace providers and consultants with their unique selling points both in the commercial sector and in an increasingly commercialising public sector (the commissioning of the VIA Institute in UK welfare being just one case in point).

We have outlined how despite efforts to distinguish positive psychology from self-help and the intangible 'magic' of positive thinking, the goal of universal optimism remains a core current running through positive psychology training in workplace settings, whether they take a psychometric strengths approach, a whole institutional appreciative inquiry approach or a holistic mindfulness approach. In a global business environment in which perpetual change is the only certainty, the attributes of motivation, maximization, emotional self-management, and personal growth have become key attributes of the employable and effective worker. And this sense of optimisation enrolls the emotional self of the whole person into the workplace culture in ways which as Hochschild argued, can be wholeheartedly alienating.

What we have also suggested here is that a geographical understanding of workplace culture can offer an original insight into the role of particular versions of psychological knowledge in reframing

citizenship and governance in three principal ways. First, educational geographies can be productively extended into new sites of empirical study such as workplaces. Secondly, we have made visible the interwoven spatialities of emotions, social relationships at work and attempts to govern worker subjectivities *through* the emotions. And thirdly, we have offered insights into the embodied and emotional performances of economic subject positions within specific workplace cultures. But the broader claim we make here is that a geographically context-sensitive approach to workplace training programmes sheds new light on the confluence between brain culture and its neoliberal economic context, contributing to emerging geographical analyses of ‘neoliberalism’⁶⁶. We do not take contemporary emotional and psychological forms of governance for granted but rather investigate the uses to which they are put and the ways in which reflexive actors conceptualise their role as emotional managers within organisational settings. In this instance, it is positive psychology and its several manifestations which for workplace training providers has become the *de rigeur* explanation of human identity – valued not just in terms of human resource management and organisational change but in terms of the personal resources that such knowledge can bring to the personal life of the trainees and trainers alike. Both the literal and figurative ‘movement’ of positive psychology from the US academic context to the UK field of workplace practice marks a geographically specific rather than universal cultural transfer which imports the long running cultural undercurrent of the American Dream into the UK workplace environment. At times this is quite explicit, for instance in the case of Appreciative Inquiry, which includes the specific notion of the dream phase in its toolkit for organisational change and decision making: “[d]reaming creates a beacon or incentive in the landscape of future possibilities”⁶⁷. Certainly dreaming is not restricted to American culture, but as Thornton has elaborated, the distinctly American rhetoric of the possible accomplishment of “personal and self-perfection” in partnership with the frontier mythology of “the solitary individual battling the forces of nature [here, the emotional brain] to acquire freedom and mastery over the environment” are both powerful forces in explaining the salience of brain culture in US popular culture⁶⁸.

In rendering scientific the ancient wisdoms of mindfulness, everyday manners of showing gratitude and appreciation, or the apparently ‘flakey’ techniques of positive visualisation, the discipline of positive psychology has set out – and in many ways succeeded – to achieve truth status for the science of optimism and optimisation. But in replacing the pseudoscience of positive thinking with the neuroscience of positive emotion, positive psychology has the effect of taking the culturally specific person out of her geographical context. By examining the specific development of positive psychology in workplace training in context as we have done here, we have tried to re-place the geographically situated subject, and to demonstrate not only the emotional labour but the practical leg-work that has gone into re-producing this increasingly wide-spread manifestation of brain culture.

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